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Violation-prone halls in region force "bingo cop" to run tight ship

By BILL BURKE , The Virginian-Pilot

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Brenda Bowman, one of four inspectors for the Department of Charitable Gaming, questions Herbert Glaser, a bingo game manager for a girls' softball league, at New Independence Hall in Virginia Beach. The inspection turned up no violations. stephen m. katz/the virginian-pilot

Corruption? Abuse? Bingo!



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Brenda Bowman strides up to the front door of the big hangar-like building in Chesapeake that once housed a roller rink. She's here on business and in uniform: dark slacks and a beige shirt with blue piping and a logo that features the initials "DCG" hovering over a bingo card.

Bowman steps inside and flashes her "badge" – an ID card for the state Department of Charitable Gaming. It's 6 o'clock on a Wednesday evening, and Brenda the bingo cop is in the house.

The start of the games at the South Military Highway hall is still an hour away, but the place is already humming. Patrons are buying \$1 "instant" bingo cards at a station near the entrance, ripping the tabs open and tossing the losers into lined garbage pails, which soon overflow.

Others are settling into their seats – packs of cigarettes and cell phones handy and fat neon-hued markers ready for the first sit-down game of the evening, a "Quickie Blowout."

Bowman has dropped by unannounced, carrying her clipboard. It's inspection night for the Hampton Roads Fundraising Foundation, which sponsors the charity session.

- [Chart: Hampton Roads, Virginia's bingo mecca](#)

- [Graphic: Receipts, expenses of a legal bingo game](#)

At 55, the retired Virginia Beach police sergeant knows all the tricks. Her hair cropped short, her manner firm but engaging, she commands attention and respect in the bingo parlors she patrols throughout southeastern Virginia.

She is one of four state bingo inspectors – only one works full-time – traveling from hall to hall, looking for violations at the games where millions of dollars change hands. Sometimes the inspectors write up violators, and when more serious problems crop up, they may initiate criminal investigations. Her territory, the Tidewater Region, is by far the busiest in the state, with some 143 stops.

Bowman stops to chat with Mike Rupe, who's manning the instant-ticket station at the Chesapeake hall. A newly installed 6-inch-high plywood barrier surrounds the station where \$20,000 or more in cash will change hands on this night. "We had a problem with people palming cash," Rupe says.

Instant bingo is the big money maker in Virginia, more lucrative than the traditional paper games.

Bowman is equal parts schmooze and scold. Most of the workers and many of the players at the Chesapeake hall know her. A few give her hugs. Some call her "The Commissioner."

She's been doing this since 2000, except for the 13 months she took off to work for the Transportation Safety Administration. She didn't like the 9-to-5 hours, preferring life on the road.

Bowman says she's heard every complaint there is: The caller is announcing the numbers too fast or too slowly. He's showing favoritism to his girlfriend. The game manager is rude.

Her favorite: "The balls are dirty." The numbered balls are plucked at random when they rise on a cushion of air. When they're soiled, they sometimes fail to pop up.

As she speaks, a middle-aged woman strolls over with yet another grievance: the toilet in the women's restroom won't flush.

"Go tell them at the snack bar, dear," Bowman says.

On this night, the Hampton Roads Fundraising Foundation gets a clean bill from Bowman: no violations. "It's unusual to find none at all," Bowman says.

On another night, in another city, Bowman is talking about the people who play bingo – most of them are regulars – and how the stereotype of blue-haired bingo-playing grandmother s doesn't reflect reality.

Among those at New Independence Hall in Virginia Beach on this Saturday are both men and women, with a sprinkling of teen agers among a mostly middle-aged-and-older crowd.

The highlight of the evening is the "Treasure Chest" game, in which a player gets a chance to win the booty in a padlocked chest.

Charles Elmore of Virginia Beach has won the preliminary game, and now he gets a crack at the big prize: \$2,959 inside the treasure chest. With 500 eyes upon him, Elmore surveys the 10 keys dangling from numbered hooks. Only one key will open the lock. Elmore chooses key No. 8, and a game official inserts it in the lock. It pops open.

The group cheers lustily and applauds. Everybody loves a winner – even if it's somebody else.

"This," Bowman says, "is what keeps them coming back."